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AUTHOR Phipps, Rita
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ABSTRACT

A theory concerning low achievement of student that applies to adult education is developed, based on an interconnection between cognitive and affective domains. A holistic picture of what happens to students may be gained from Piaget's theory of intellectual development, Bloom's hierarchy of cognitive abilities, theories proposing that what students believe or think influences their behavior and self-concept, and theories of learning motivation. Noncognitive factors that affect motivation may include learning style, achievement anxiety, and locus of control. Some hypothetical first-grade children's profiles and the possible outcomes are considered, and it is suggested that it is not simple to discern the cause of a child's failure as a student. If a child experiences an inability or a lack of desire or an active aversion to learn reading when it is required to do so and is called stupid, the child may develop self-concepts of being a bad student and feel unable to succeed. A child in elementary school may be thought of as going through an acute or onset stage of academic-skills-deprivation if he does not learn the required academic skills. Maladaption to the requirements of the school may be the cause of adult students who have academic-skills-deprivation. The adult can live with the concept of self as a poor student if the adult develops other compensatory skills: people skills, or special interest skills. Those adults who have never been able to develop compensatory skills are without means to develop self-esteem. The academically unprepared adult who has compensated will need remedial assistance in postsecondary education while the adult who has not compensated also will need counseling and personal help. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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TOWARDS A HOLISTIC THEORY OF ADULT EDUCATION:

ACADEMIC-SKILLS-DEPRIVATION, CAUSE and CURE

Rita Phipps
North Seattle Community College
9600 College Way North
Seattle, WA 98103

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TOWARDS A HOLISTIC THEORY OF ADULT EDUCATION:

Academic-Skills-Deprivation, Cause and Cure

I. In Search of a Theory for Adult Students

In 1976, William Moore challenged the assumptions held by community college educators concerning the underprepared and underachieving student. He indicted the community of writers in the field of doing little more than making collective restatements of the problem (p. 3). "Thus there is considerable question in my mind about the extent to which poor achievement can be traced to the social, economic, family, motivational, and environmental backgrounds of the student . . . ."

"Any serious student of the community college will find him[/her]-self compelled, painfully and gradually, to discard one accepted educational 'fact' after another about low-achieving students . . . . [He/she] usually discovered that many of the things he[/she] learned turned out to be sets of officially certified nonfacts and respected assumptions" p. 4). He says that except for Cross (1971) and Knoell (1970), and a few others, there has been no original research by community college writers: "instead they have simply repeated the unsubstantiated assumptions and observations made by the published predecessors" (p. 4).

Moore's rejection of the "respected assumption" that cultural, social, economic, environmental deprivation is the reason for poor achievement is validated if we believe Pitcher and Blauschild (1970, pp. 107-108): "the same symptoms found in ghetto populations are found in the wealthy. Both the underachieving wealthy and the deprived

student can have the same inability to plan long-range goals and the same indifference to grades . . . . Both groups can show reading, writing, or speaking problems in the academic sense, and have the same ups and downs in academic performance."

As the causes of low achievement are in questions, so are theories and methods used in the 1960's and 1970's to help the low-achieving student. Moore (1976) (with Cross [1976] and Maxwell [1979] and many other writers in the field) calls for basic and applied research. "The literature does not reveal a single delineated theory of curriculum in the community college . . . . [T]he philosophy, mission, techniques remain unanalyzed."

Maxwell (1979) reports that in 1978 Grant and Reisman analyzed over 400 colleges and discovered that "none had found the panacea . . . . [And Grant and Reisman] criticize competency-based-performance programs and independent study approaches . . ." (p. 380). Maxwell herself criticizes the mastery learning theory: "courses for underprepared students taught with mastery learning methods have yielded more failures than successes . . ." (p. 380). Good students do well in individualized or self-instructional programs, but "longitudinal studies of individualized courses have failed to show that any of the innovative, personalized methods is consistently superior to traditional teaching methods." Maxwell goes on to identify the aspects that, empirically, seem to work well for low-achieving students: "What seems to matter most in improving learning of underprepared students is the amount of exposure students get to the course

material, the amount of time they spend in direct, structured learning situations, and the skills of their teachers . . . . However, the most important factor is the instructor" (p. 381).

Wittrock (1979), speaking for the cognitive movement in instruction, adds the view that the student, also, has a critical role to play: ". . . the teacher is responsible for teaching; the learner is responsible for learning, which is an internal process involving attention and the mental elaboration of information" (p. 6). Wittrock, further, in citing deCharms (1976)--researching in the area of locus of control and attribution--, writes, "deCharms has offered a new approach to a fundamental problem in instruction in schools. He raises serious questions about the long-term effects upon instruction and upon students of the notion of accountability only for teachers." . . .[:]

"A sense of ability to control the environment is often important to achievement in school" (pp. 6-7).

By considering, and seeing an inter-connection between, both cognitive and affective domains, a theory of the cause of low achievement begins to emerge. In this theory is the notion that the student must have an internal locus of control and must attribute the cause of failure and success to aspects over which the student has control. Weiner (1976), reviewing a number of studies, delineates a model in which students can attribute success and failure to their own ability (a stable, internal cause) or to lack of effort (an unstable, internal cause); or the student can attribute them to the difficulty of the

material (a stable, external cause) or to luck (an unstable, external cause).

"Attribution of failure to lack of effort, rather than to luck or to lack of ability, leads to the inference that effort should be increased to attain success in school . . . . Weiner (1976) offers support for the model and its utility for redesigning motivational procedures in school" (Wittrock, 1979, p. 7).

Hunter (1979) deepens our appreciation of the effective dimension by stating that non-cognitive or affective factors are crucial, are, perhaps, even more important than cognitive factors in student success and failure. "Some researchers even believe that affective information will eventually be shown to account for the major portion of the total variance in learner achievement . . . . Analysis of non-cognitive factors should uncover hidden relationships between . . . learning style, achievement anxiety, and/or locus of control vis-à-vis student persistence in learning and achievement in college courses . . .[;] one can predict that undue stress caused by dissonance in almost any learning style . . . , or an accumulation of anxiety-producing events, or an external control expectation will lower the probability of academic success" (p. 45). All these factors affect motivation, that key to success in any arena, including, most particularly, the academic.

The views of writers in motivation seem to challenge Moore's rejection of motivational causes (Moore, 1976, p. 3) for a student's poor achievement; but if we ask what causes the motivation to be

inadequate, we can answer, more or less with Moore, that the cause may not necessarily be cultural, economic, or environmental background. The indifference to grades and the inconsistency in performance found by Pitcher and Blaushild (1970) in both wealthy and ghetto students would tend to support the validity of this assumption.

Trying to avoid the empirically-produced local theories or local solutions that Gehlbach (1979) inveighs against and to base our product-oriented theory (we do want to use the theory to help students achieve success) on a firm and general theoretical base, we will want to see whether there are any appropriate and relevant theories of learning/education other than those whose credibility and validity are questioned by such writers as Maxwell (1979) and Grant and Reisman (1978).

Twice Maxwell (1979) mentions Piaget in connection with the usefulness of his theory of intellectual development to discover the cause of students' failing to learn math and science. "Researchers who have reviewed studies based on Piaget's theory of intellectual development conclude that about seventy-five percent of the seventeen-year-olds and over half the college freshmen in this country have not reached the level of formal operations, which is necessary to understand the abstract concepts required for modern college preparatory and college mathematics (Chiapetta, 1976; Lowry, 1974)" (p. 335). "Some educators proclaim that the majority of adults and adolescents have not attained the level of

formal operations, described by Piaget as essential to understanding the abstractions of scientific thought . . ." (p. 360).

Piaget's theory, though challenged by some writers in relation to its application to adults* (Munby, 1978; Novak, 1977; Whitbourne and Weinstock, 1979), is generally and widely accepted in terms of his basic theory of the development of cognitive abilities in childhood.

Thus, if we take a Piagetian view of the early and linear development of the intellect; apply to Bloom (1956) for an understanding of the development of hierarchical cognitive abilities; attend to the many writers and researchers who theorize that "What the learners believe or think influences their behavior" (Mischel and Baker, 1975) and that if they attribute the cause of their success or failure to their own lack of ability or "okayness" they may develop a fear-threatened personality (Atkinson, 1966; Holt, 1970; Kozol, 1970; Berne, 1961; Kaufman, Baron and Popp, 1966); include the view of some that human beings have a "natural desire to be rational and to understand [their] environment and [their] place in it" (Roueche, 1972) and that "The will to learn is an intrinsic motive, one that finds both its source and its reward in its own extrinsic exercise" (Bruner, 1966, p. 127; also Piaget and Aristotle); also keeping in mind Krathwohl's and others' (1964)

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*These challengers of Piaget do not, in my view, understand Piaget's key concept of mental structures. See bibliography: Phillips, Phipps.

hierarchy of the affective domain, leading from recognition that a value exists ("trying to be a good student is good") to the characterization of one's self by the value ("I am in fact really trying to be a good student!"); and not forgetting the motivational work of deCharms and Weiner in which it is evidenced that when students believe they can control their own destiny as students--when, in fact, this is a true possibility within their school--they do begin to reverse their destiny from one of failing to one of succeeding; then, perhaps, we can begin to form a holistic picture of what happens to students.

II. Academic-Skills-Deprivation, Cause and Cure

Moore (1976) provides a most provocative insight when he reminds us that research on children cannot be translated into an understanding of adults, since adults go through many experiences between their years in K-12 and their arrival at a community college as twenty-seven-year-olds or even thirty-two-year-olds (the average age of students at Seattle Central Community College, for example) or sixty-five-year-olds (returning senior citizens are becoming an increasingly large segment of the community college student body: Cross, 1974; Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1971; Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973).

It may be useful at this point to contrast briefly the life experiences of children, adolescents and adults. Kozol (1970) and Holt (1970) show us what Furth (1970) discusses from a Piagetian

perspective: a child's environment can significantly affect his/her normal, natural intellectual growth. If, for example, a child, during his/her initial school experience, finds him/herself in a hostile (e.g., racist, sexist, elitist) or learning-style dissonant or intellectual-development-readiness lagging or advanced environment, the child's attribution of success and failure and the child's locus of control and self-image may be adversely affected. That this stage in a child's life is hazardous, as well as anguishing, is revealed by Holt's (1970) interviews with elementary school children: "They said they were afraid of failing . . . afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid. Stupid. Why is it such a deadly insult to these children, almost the worst thing they can think of to call each other?" (p. 63). Atkinson and Feather (1966) tell us that people whose major concern is to avoid failure, those with a fear-threatened personality, avoid tasks in which the outcome is uncertain. They will select easy tasks or tasks so hard the failure is expected. These people will take no risks. Is it any wonder that children who fear failure (viz., being seen and known as stupid), and suffer from failure in an environment in which failure is inevitable, become low achievers, have poor motivation, develop an external locus of control, internalize the self-characterization of "I am stupid"? Furth (1970) writes: "when reading is over-emphasized and the child, for intellectual, social or emotional reasons, is not ready for it, then we should not be surprised at the number of intellectual and social failures we see

around us."

Let us look at some hypothetical first grade children's profiles and the possible outcomes. We will consider only a few of the plethora of variables that are active in a child at this time. (NOTE: economic and social backgrounds as well as sex and race are not included. If these profiles are accurate--research is needed--, then Moore's contention that low achievement cannot be traced to social, economic or environmental backgrounds, or even to motivation or family, except in a complex formula of many variables, would be validated.)

KEY:*

1+	home expectations for academic success	(Krathwohl)
1-	no home expectations for academic success	
2+	at intellectual stage that is reading-ready	(Piaget)
2++	at intellectual stage that is slight advanced beyond reading-readiness	
2+++	at intellectual stage that is greatly advanced beyond reading-readiness	
2-	at stage that is not yet reading-ready	
3+	entering with sense of "I am okay as I am!"	(Berne, Krathwohl, Mischel & Baker, Atkinson, Kaufman & others, Stevenson & others)
3-	entering with sense of "I'm okay only if I obey my elders."	
3--	entering with sense of "I'm not okay."	
4+	out-of-school intellectual stimulation, at home, with peers, and/or in the street	(Bloom, Weiner, Roueche, Bruner)
4-	little or no out-of-school intellectual stimulation	
4--	out-of-school stifling of intellectual activity	

	PROFILES		OUTCOMES
CHILD A:	1+, 2+, 3+, 4+)		successful student, learns academic
CHILD B:	1+, 2+, 3-, 4--)	=	skills
CHILD C:	1-, 2+, 3-, 4-)		
CHILD D:	1-, 2+++, 3+, 4+)		unsuccessful student, inconsistent
CHILD E:	1+, 2++, 3--, 4+)	=	performance, behavior problem,
CHILD F:	1-, 2-, 3+, 4-)		possible future drop-out, doesn't learn academic skills
CHILD G:	1+, 2-, 3-, 4--)		unsuccessful student, tries hard,
CHILD H:	1+, 2+++, 3--, 4+)	=	doesn't learn academic skills
CHILD I:	1-, 2+, 3--, 4-)		

*When one includes learning style, energy level, aptitudes, area of interest, thing- or people-skill development, teacher's teaching style, teacher's attitudes and expectations, school's style--traditional, alternative, etc.--the profiles will become more accurate--and more complex. The causes of success or failure in school are complex.

A child in elementary school may be thought of as going through an acute or onset stage of academic-skills deprivation if s/he does not learn the required academic skills. The shock (Hutchins, 1968) and the epithet of "stupid" may be so severe as to cause such a child deep suffering. Roueche (1972) quotes Hutchins (1968, p. 29) on the shock a child can experience in school, writing that Hutchins refers to it "as educational shock. He says: 'Those who have passed with the least shock into the system go farthest in it, [and] those to whom the shock is severe are labeled stupid and tolerated no longer than the law permits.' Hutchins implies that learning cannot occur if the student is confounded and retarded by the system. The after-effects or consequences of this problem is particularly felt in the community college, which draws much of its student body from environments which make the student particularly susceptible to educational shock" (p. 40). Bruner (1966) and Leonard (1968) indicate that not only will suffering and non-learning occur under these circumstances but also that the child's "will to learn" (Bruner, p. 127) and ecstasy in learning (Leonard) will be damaged, if not destroyed.

Child D, in the profile schema above, is a child who would be entering school with advanced cognitive abilities, with an already-experienced joy of learning--and who will be turned by the system into a disgruntled, frustrated, rebellious person ripe for dropping out. "The will to learn becomes a 'problem' only under specialized

circumstances like those of a school, where a curriculum is set, students confined, and a path fixed" (Bruner, 1966, p. 127).

Piaget addresses this same phenomenon. In the Piagetian view, when a child who is joyfully experiencing intellectual growth, expressed in curiosity, thinking and learning about concrete events and things, is sat down in front of a piece of paper with abstract symbols on it and told s/he must learn these abstractions, the child is forced to stop thinking so that s/he can learn something that is dissonant with the child's stage of intellectual development but which the school system has determined s/he must learn, whether the child is ready for it, wants it, needs it, or will have his/her natural, spontaneous intellectual growth stifled by it. As with Child D, whose unsuccessful outcome is essentially the same as Child F's (who is not yet ready, is far behind Child D's cognitive growth): what if the child has developed more quickly than most and has not only passed the initial stage of abstraction required for beginning reading but is beyond it to, perhaps, even one of Bloom's higher cognitive levels; then, to that child, being forced to go back and deal with low-level cognitive skills and low-level abstractions would surely be intolerable, an educational shock. If this child came from a family which did not expect academic success, which did not provide reading experiences for the child; from an economic, social or cultural background which provided intellectual stimulation but no expectations for

academic success--the child might not become a good reader, might, in fact, become a poor student.

The implications of the profiles above are that we cannot easily divine the cause of a child's failure as student, an advanced child and a child not yet ready having the same outcome: a condition which I will name "academic-skills-deprivation." If a child experiences an inability or a lack of desire or an active aversion to learn reading when it is required to do so and is called stupid--and neither the teacher nor the student nor the parent nor any friend is able to tell the student that the student is ok and, instead, it is the system that is to blame--, the student will be a candidate for such self-concepts as, "I'm stupid as a student!" "I'm dumber in school than others!" "I'm a lousy student!" "I can't succeed in school!" <u>These are the self-concepts that are symptomatic of someone suffering from "academic-skills-deprivation."</u>

When an academic-skills-deprived child grows up and becomes an underprepared or under-achieving adult student at a community college, we can say his/her being <u>academic-skills-deprived since childhood</u> is probably the <u>cause</u> of the <u>adult</u> student's learning difficulty, fear of failure, fear of taking risks, defensiveness, low self-concept as a student and probable failure (attrition rates in community colleges are often as high as 50%). But does this mean the adult is experiencing, as the child does at the

onset of academic-skills-deprivation in elementary school, dissonance between the school's insistence upon the student's learning a skill at a higher or lower level than his/her own level of intellectual development? Is this dissonance, if it is occurring, occurring with the same degree of pain that the child feels?

Moore (1976) thinks not: "Can we accept the proposition that the age of two-year-college students, their mobility, employment, experience, learning, and other factors have no positive effect on them even if they were culturally disadvantaged as children? . . . Thus, one may reasonably challenge the application of the cultural deprivation hypothesis to community college students" (p. 6). One can, by the same token, reasonably challenge the unqualified application of any hypothesis to adults which holds true for children. "I suggest that the personality is not static, that 'the adult is a constantly adapting organism' (Birren, 1964)" (Moore, 1976, p. 6).

If we can view our underprepared adult students as people who have academic-skills-deprivation, we can infer that as children they, at some time, perhaps when six years old, experienced the painful onset and acute stage of maladaption to the school system. After that time, they perhaps experienced a crisis stage (in junior high, during the onset of puberty), and then entered, in high school, the chronic stage of academic-skills-deprivation (Phipps, 1981): in the chronic stage, the adult can live with the concept of self as a poor student if the adult develops other,

compensatory skills: people skills, thing skills (Cross, 1976), special interest skills. "I'm dumb but have lots of friends and love to help other people." "I'm a terrible student, but let me show you my terrific coin collection." "I'm really stupid, but I'm the highest scorer on our company bowling team." "I never was good in school, but I just got elected as shop steward in my union." Of course, none of these people is stupid; they are only academic-skills-deprived.

These are many of our adult community college students: academic-skills-deprived, characterizing themselves as poor students, school failures, stupid, but no longer suffering as the child does in the acute, onset stage; they are now chronic (perhaps some even hard-core) cases; and many may have compensatory skills which provide general self-esteem.

Those adults who have never been able to develop compensatory skills (perhaps some housewives who never felt adequate to their role as wife and mother and are now divorced) are in a chronic stage of academic-skills-deprivation, but without any means to develop self-esteem. It might be useful to community colleges, in their planning programs for underprepared and underachieving adult students, to distinguish between and identify these two types of underprepared, underachieving adult students: 1) The uncompensated students may need a great deal of support and preparatory work before they can successfully tackle academic work; on the other hand,

2) the compensated students ("I'm dumb but I'm okay!") need only to correct the academic-skills-deprivation and become more academic-skills-rich in order to succeed in academic courses. The compensated adult students also, of course, need to reverse their self-image as poor students--but successful academic experiences will be able to do that for them as by their taking preparatory, developmental courses before going on to the academic courses. The uncompensated adults ("I'm dumb and I'm not okay!") will, in addition, need a lot of counseling and personal, emotional help.

Both types, however, will experience fear and anxiety, to one degree or another, as legacies from the past, as obstacles to be removed. But college counselors and instructors should not misread the fear of a compensated academic-skills-deprived adult student and believe that this student needs personal, emotional counseling and support. Such "treatment" is inappropriate and unwelcome to the otherwise confident adult. Such treatment, though, is not only welcomed but essential to the uncompensated and generally unconfident adult. Early screening and proper identification of these two types of academic-skills-deprived adult students will allow the college to respond appropriately and effectively to them. In this way, the compensated student can expeditiously move through an acquisition of basic academic skills and on to success in the regular academic programs; whereas, the uncompensated student can be offered, as well, a plethora of self-improvement courses, with

opportunities for developing a support system with counseling, peer groups (as in a returning women's center), etc.

We can see that, as most writers and researchers in the field indicate, the search for a holistic, effective theory of education that will guide community college educators is far from over. The question of what the most important factor(s) is(are) remain(s) to be answered. Is it the instructor? The community college's programs (developmental, non-traditional options, etc.)? The student him/herself (aptitudes, academic skills level, locus of control, motivation, confidence, etc.)?

Is it the student's early educational experiences in terms of the complex pattern of student profile variables? That is, is it academic-skills-deprivation and whether the sufferer has developed compensating skills with attendant self-esteem in non-academic spheres? Or, in other words, is it that non-learning, rather than learning, of academic skills took place in childhood? Is it the anxiety and fear and suffering or shock that is experienced when learning of the academic skills can't/doesn't take place on schedule--and the consequent internalization of negative values about learning and one's self as a learner?

Kozol (1970) gives us a poignant picture of an adolescent student in a Boston "discipline school" who has not learned how to read. "I remember a boy like this at that school who asked me privately, and with much embarrassment, if I would get him a First

Grade book at a library or bookstore since he couldn't find such a book at school and was embarrassed at his age to walk into a public place and ask for one. He wanted desperately to read. He knew for sure what he was in for if he could not catch up now. Yet the school offered him nothing and he had to humble himself to plead with me. One of the saddest things on earth is the sight of a young person, already becoming an adolescent, who has lost about five years . . ." (p. 47).

Our students may not be openly pleading for educational assistance--but would they identify with Kozol's student to some degree?

The problem, as I have tried to demonstrate here, is extremely complex; and some of our cherished assumptions may have to be laid aside. But the search is infinitely worthwhile because human intelligence is the human species' greatest resource--we must find a way to develop, nourish and maximize it, turning our low achievers into high achievers.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to develop a theory of education which prevents low achievement and allows all our children to realize and actualize their intellectual abilities--in school and not despite it.

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